

# DIME NOVEL ROUND-UP

A monthly magazine devoted to the collecting, preservation and literature of the old-time dime and nickel novels, libraries and popular story papers.

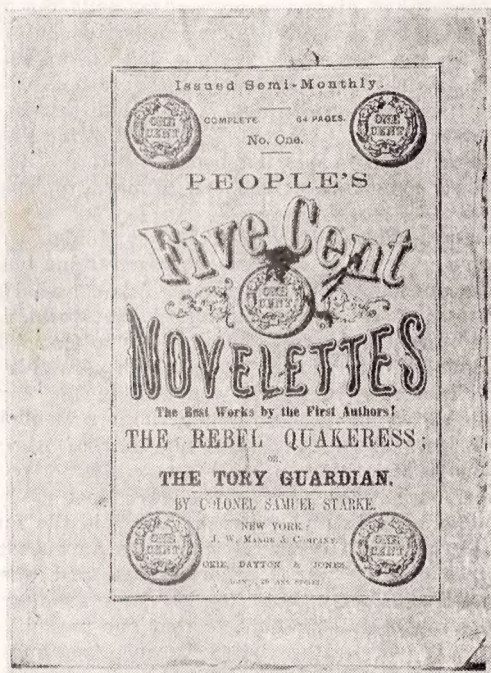
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## Oliver Optic (William Taylor Adams) As Author and Editor

By S. E. Wallen



DIME NOVEL SKETCHES NO. 183

PEOPLE'S FIVE CENT NOVELETTES

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# Oliver Optic (William Taylor Adams) As Author and Editor

By S. E. Wallen

An Effort as the Start of a Definitive Check List

## Part I

### Introduction to Confusion

The above title is used with malice aforethought. For most of his productive years Oliver Optic was apparently running a race to keep his writing ahead of weekly or monthly publications, some of which he, himself, was editing. Not only must he have always been looking behind him to see how closely periodicals were nipping at his heels, but he must have had Lee & Shepard breathing down his neck for additional, independent book manuscripts.

The material quoted herein consists of "bits and pieces"—and we have not always been able to reconcile the pieces. We do apologize if we "annoy" any reader, but this method gives sources and spreads the available information before us for consideration. We guarantee only our own comments; including a few relative observations and some discursiveness.

We begin with a fairly long and complete quotation. Usually, the nearer the event, the more accurate we can export the facts that emerge to be. Here is a great deal, in the first quote, about William T. Adams that appears to be comparatively safe to paste in our notebooks.

The parenthetical comments at the end of paragraphs are our responsibility.

From *Golden Days*, Vol. XVIII, #24, May 1, 1897:

"There died on March 27 of the present year, at his home in Dorchester, Mass., an old gentleman named William Taylor Adams, who was, in his special line of writing, the most celebrated author in the world. Very few of his readers know him by his real name, but as 'Oliver Optic' his name was so familiar that we doubt if there is an intelligent boy in this country who has not heard of it. (Remember that this was written 78 years ago. Try this out on the next ten boys you meet; will they vaguely recall hearing the name of Oliver Optic or Horatio Alger, Jr.? Only that of Alger, probably. We cannot expect them to have read either!)

William Taylor Adams was born in Medway, Mass., July 30, 1822, where he attended the public schools, and where he also laid the foundation for that nautical knowledge which was so useful to him as an author.

"When a young man, he was a schoolteacher, and was head master of Bowditch School until 1865. By that time his fame as a writer was assured, and he determined to devote all his time to that one pursuit.

"In pursuance of this object he visited Europe, Asia and Africa, and made copious notes for future works. He spoke French, and could read Spanish, Italian and German.

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"Thus equipped by nature and application, it is no wonder that he soon became the foremost writer of juvenile literature. He was always exact in his descriptions, interesting in his plots, and lively in delineation of character."<sup>1</sup> (The above two paragraphs make clear that Oliver Optic was much better prepared to write than was Horatio Alger, Jr., who will be mentioned off and on as a competitor.)

"His greatest success, however, was due to the fact that his stories were always pure in tone. When he began to write, nearly all stories for boys made the pirate or outlaw a hero (and the fashion has not died out yet), throwing a halo over vice, and thus appealing to the readers sympathy.

"I considered these books very bad," said Oliver Optic, on one occasion, because they brought the reader in sympathy for the wicked and the evil. Now, my idea was that the stories just as exciting could be written without any of these evil tendencies. In fact I can truthfully say I have never written a story which would excite the love, admiration and sympathy of the reader for an evil person or a bad character. I have never made a hero whose moral character or whose lack of high aims or purposes could mislead the young reader. This has been my standard, and, however others may regard it, I deem it a safe one."

"This is the keynote to the author's character, and the descendants of Oliver Optic may well be proud of his fame.

"The readers of *Golden Days* have reason to remember this writer with pleasure. He was associated with this paper from its first volume, and has contributed to its pages some of his best work.

"As a matter of interest, it may be explained how he came to adopt his pen name. A burlesque was being played in Boston, in which the principle character was 'Doctor Optic, M.D.' Mr. Adams was not only pleased with the performance, but also impressed by the name, and prefixing 'Oliver,' for the sake of euphony, he attached it as a pen name to his first juvenile story, 'The Boat Club,' written in 1855." (The copyright notice in "The Boat Club" is 1854.)

Since Oliver Optic did not appear in *Golden Days* until 1880 we will discuss this publication of his writings later. In this first part we are concerned with the record up to 1867 only.

It has been said that Oliver Optic wrote regularly five hours a day.

"Hatchie, the Guardian Slave" in 1853 was his first book and his first adult book. After this attempt over the pen name of Warren T. Ashton, he seems to be off and flying as Oliver Optic with "The Boat Club Series" for juveniles. From there on he is a hard man to pin down. But it will be fun trying to keep up with him.

We have heard of two additional "adult" books, neither of which did well, "The Way of the World" (1868) and "Living Too Fast" (?). In 1868 he had published "Our Standard Bearer; Life of General U. S. Grant" which, quoting Oliver Optic's Magazine, was "for Young and Old." That gives us an additional three volumes toward our total.

For "Hatchie, the Guardian Slave; or, The Heiress of Bellevue," he received \$37.50. In 1873 he was to be paid \$5,000 for two stories appearing in the *Fireside Companion*.

Pen names other than Oliver Optic and Warren T. Ashton, the latter which he only used the one time to our knowledge, are said to have been: Irving Brown, Clingham Hunter, M.D., Gale Winterton, Brooks McCormick, and Old Stager. The only story, a short one, that has been reported over his own name (William T. Adams) was "The Whaleman's Daughter; or, The Mysterious Pilot" which appeared in 1857 in the *Yankee Privateer*.



No particular effort will be made here to uncover any of Adams' writings under any pen names other than Oliver Optic; so this leaves a largely unexplored field for some future researcher.<sup>2</sup>

Sometime during 1870 to 1882 he appeared in the "awful" dime novels of Beadle and Adams' publications: *Young New Yorker*, *Saturday Journal* and the *Banner Weekly*.

*Munsey's Magazine* for October, 1892 had an article by Frank A. Munsey entitled "Two Veteran Authors." The two authors were Oliver Optic and Horatio Alger, Jr. There is no claim made that Oliver Optic ever wrote for Munsey. It does state that "Mr. Adams began writing as far back as 1848." This is an earlier date than we have had so far, however, later we will have something more on probable dates before 1853. The balance of the article by Munsey covers territory that is already familiar to us, except for the statement: "He avoids tedious descriptions and never preaches. (And that statement is very much a matter of opinion!)"

An early printing of *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* tells us a few facts: "He is of English descent, his ancestor, Henry Adams, having come from Great Britain to Quincy, Mass., in 1630 . . . In 1838 . . . he made his earliest attempts at literary composition . . . His first printed article appeared in the 'Social Monitor.' In 1848 he was chosen principal of what is now the Harris School of Boston, and his experience as a teacher in that city lasted for about twenty years. Then he resigned his position and visited Europe . . . he published two temperance tales in the *Washingtonian*, in 1845 . . . 'Hatchie, the Guardian Slave' . . . was followed by 'In Doors and Out' (1855), a collection of stories. From 1858 to 1866 he edited the 'Student and Schoolmate,' a monthly magazine for young people, and from 1867, onward (to 1875), 'Oliver Optic's Magazine for Boys and Girls.' In 1867 he became a member of the school board or Dorchester (now Boston), Mass. . . In 1870 and in 1873 he was re-elected. He has served a term in the legislature of Massachusetts. In 1870 he made a second tour in Europe. He is best known by his juvenile stories, which have been legion in number—one authority giving that in 1887, as 1,000, exclusive of his volumes, which another authority gives as sixty-two in number . . . the aggregate sale of his writings having been estimated at over 1,000,000 volumes . . . At one time he had 1,200 scholars and twenty-five teachers under his immediate control. For twenty years he was a Sunday-school teacher, and for ten years a Sunday-school Superintendent. His motto in writing for his constituency, as once given in conversation, is 'First God, then country, then friends.'"

For a period he edited *Our Little Ones*. While this has been stated several times in the early records, the length of time and any other details seem to be missing.

From an early edition of the *Dictionary of American Biography*: ". . . (he) was the son of Capt. Laban Adams and Catherine (Johnson) Adams, and a descendant of Henry Adams of Braintree . . . His father was proprietor of the Lamb Tavern, Boston. In 1838 the family moved to a farm in West Roxbury. Here the boy found it difficult to take time from farm work to keep up his schooling. Winter nights he studied late in a room so cold he could hardly keep his blood in circulation and turned the pages with a mittened hand. But he succeeded in leading his classes in almost every subject, especially composition. His parents were so proud of his ability that they managed to have him continue his studies under a private tutor, for two years after leaving school. Then followed a period of travel through the Northern and Southern states during which he took voluminous notes, which later stood him in good stead. After a brief experience of helping his father manage the



first Adams House, on the site of the Lamb Tavern, he turned to teaching. In 1846 he married Sarah Jenkins of Dorchester, by whom he had two daughters . . . The initial volume, *The Boat Club*, ran through sixty editions. (He traveled abroad) furnishing material for the *Young America Abroad* and *All Over the World* series . . . he wrote love stories as Irving Brown, travel sketches as Clingham Hunter, M.D., and he sometimes signed himself Old Stager. He never wrote over his own name . . . his output totaled 126 books . . . At first the public libraries refused his books because his heroes accomplished too many improbable feats . . ." (See the earlier reference to "The Whaleman's Daughter" in *Yankee Privateer* of 1857, suggesting that at least on one occasion he did write under his own name.)

This is a good spot to call attention to an earlier statement that usually a summary made nearer the event is likely to be factual. In that light it is interesting to recognize how many different sidelights are shown in a number of quotations that are, roughly, fairly early. It is also quite interesting to see that not one of them appears to agree on the total number of books published. It will be even more interesting to see what this account comes out with as the total at the conclusion of the second part.

One final quotation. This time from the first edition of Meigs' *A Critical History of Children's Literature* (1953), which has proven itself too often wrong in many of its statements: ". . . by 1850 he had become the author of a hundred and seventy volumes; small ones . . . sixteen full length books . . ." We are not told what the 170 titles of the small books might have been, and the "sixteen full length books" is a ridiculous statement to have been made as late as 1953. He was barely hitting his stride with "The Boat Club" in 1855, and most of his production was between 1875 and 1896. This writer already has 66 full book titles in his personal collection. Actually there is nearly another fifty to go. How could any serious researcher overlook such an overwhelming amount of production. Recently we saw a revised edition of *A Critical History* with many of the obvious mistakes of the first corrected, but we did not check on the section quoted above from the original edition. My friend John T. Dizer, Jr., reported many errors in Meigs' 1953 edition, so any reliance on it alone must be researched before use. Actually we know of 12 small book titles, of which we only have five in our own collection. The twelve titles will be listed shortly.

By now you have probably heard more about William T. Adams than you ever intended to know. We have intentionally not tried to clear up any differences in the various quotations, especially since we, ourselves, are not really always certain of what is fact or fiction in the various accounts. Nor do we quite know how to go about proving many of the points—especially at this late date. We are about finished with long quotations. From here on we will try to restrain ourselves to personal "relative" observations with only a few (hopefully interesting) personal discursions. Already you can see why this first part was called "Introduction to Confusion."

The following juvenile books were published before *Oliver Optic's Magazine* (1867-75). Years shown are usually copyright dates. Often the book was not published until the following year. Keep in mind that "written," "copyright," "published," and "cataloged in a publisher's catalog" are entirely different. For example, we have a copy of "Down the Rhine," which bears the printed notice that the copyright was 1869 (and this first came out in book form), the title page is imprinted with the date 1870 and the written gift inscription reads: "Christmas 1869." So the book was published for listing in the 1870 catalog, but was actually sold during the holiday period of 1869.

### The Boat Club Series

The Boat Club; or, The Bunkers of Rippleton. (1854)  
 All Aboard; or, Life on the Lake. (1855)  
 Now or Never; or, The Adventures of Bobby Bright. (1856)  
 Try Again; or, The Trials and Triumphs of Harry West. (1857)  
 Poor and Proud; or, The Fortunes of Katy Redburn. (1858)  
 Little by Little; or, The Cruise of the Flyaway. (1860)

### The Woodville Series

Rich and Humble; or, The Mission of Bertha Grant. (1863)  
 Watch and Wait; or, The Young Fugitives. (1864)  
 Work and Win; or, Noddy Newman on a Cruise. (1865)  
 Hope and Have; or, Fanny Grant among the Indians. (1866)  
 Haste and Waste; or, The Young Pilot of Lake Champlain. (1866)  
 It is already clear that Optic liked to run his series in sets of six titles.

### The Army and Navy Series

The Sailor Boy; or, Jack Somers in the Navy. (1863)  
 The Yankee Middy; or, Jack Somers in the Navy. (1863)  
 Brave Old Salt; or, Life on the Quarter Deck. (1866)  
 The Soldier Boy; or, Tom Somers in the Army. (1863)  
 The Young Lieutenant; or, The Adventures of an Army Officer. (1865)  
 Fighting Joe; or, The Fortunes of a Staff Officer. (1863)

For some unknown reason, the writer seems to find The Army and Navy Series much more available than others.

While we are thinking in terms of years of copyright, it will be interesting to later take the given years and see just what Oliver Optic was producing in each year. He must have been a quick writer if he kept to his five hours per day.

### Riverdale Series

The following probably are the "one hundred and seventy small books" that A Critical History refers to. They are small thin volumes published for the very young; first by Phillips, Samson & Co., Boston; later by Lee & Shepard. In the earlier advertising they were divided into "Riverdale Story Books" and "Flora Lee Story Books," later they were referred to only as the "Riverdale Stories." The only copyright date we have found (so many of our collection of the Riverdale Stories are cheap reprints—so cheap they forgot all dates completely) is 1862:

Little Merchant	Young Voyagers
Christmas Gift	Dolly and I
Uncle Ben	Birthday Party
Proud and Lazy	Careless Kate
Robinson Crusoe, Jr.	The Picnic Party
The Gold Thimble	The Do-Somethings

These twelve "small books" in early editions are hard to come by.

We complete our listing of titles before 1867 with a final volume:

Young America Abroad (First Series)

### Outward Bound; or, Young America Afloat (1866)

It is surprising that with all the phases of collecting open to us, usually we begin with gathering together all that any one author has written—and too often stop there. As this progresses we should begin to realize that popular works have a long and interesting life of being published in a variety of editions, and often by a number of different publishing houses. It could be a genuine challenge to seek out a favorite author and endeavor to collect



him/her in as many editions as possible. Oliver Optic had at least two lesser known publishers than Lee & Shepard. We have already mentioned Phillips, Sampson & Co. as early publishers of the Riverdale Stories. We have also read, by Helen L. Jones about Boston publishers in *The Horn Book Magazine*, that Crosby, Nichols, Lee and Company were extremely active in the 1860's and who, to quote, "were turning out 'small monstrosities, plus a half dozen early Oliver Optics.'" We cannot but help wonder if the Lee of Crosby, Nichols, Lee and Company had any connection with the Lee of Lee & Shepard? We also learn here that Phillips, Sampson and Company closed shop in the panic of 1857 and Lee & Shepard took over their stock and authors. We also learn from this same source that Lee & Shepard's catalog for 1900 listed 123 Oliver Optics—this you will recognize was three years after his death, when we can safely assume that everything from his pen with any marketable value must have surely been published. Again, we must also assume that by 1900 Lee & Shepard were only listing Oliver Optic juvenile titles. Don't you cheer at Ms. Jones' 'small monstrosities?'

The time has come to digress a bit. Be patient and we will tie all of this digression in with the Oliver Optic pattern. As you will recall, *The National Cyclopaedia of American Biography* quote told us that "from 1858 to 1866 (Oliver Optic) edited *The Student and Schoolmate*, a monthly magazine for young people and from 1867 he began editing *Oliver Optic's Magazine—Our Boys and Girls*." (He actually edited his magazine as long as it was published; the last number being December, 1875.)

The writer's interest has always been captured by the early juvenile magazines, but our experience has been that they are becoming increasingly hard to find. We can suppose that if popular books were worn out with use, what must have happened to their paper-backed brothers and sisters, often printed on less substantial paper than book-stock. Part of our interest stems from the fact that many juvenile books first appeared in print as serials in magazines—a fact that students of Horatio Alger, Jr. have long been aware of. Histories and general information about the earlier papers aren't too plentiful, or is it always easy to come by what may have been written.

In 1856 *The Student and Schoolmate—A Monthly Reader for School and Home Instruction—Declamation and Self-Improvement* was published by Robson & Richardson, 119 Washington St., Boston and M. A. Calkins & Co., 348 Broadway, New York. By April of 1860 the cover was reading *Student and Schoolmate and Forrester's Boys & Girls Magazine—A Reader for Schools and Families* and the publishers were Robinson, Greene & Co., 15 Cornhill, Boston and N. A. Calkins, 348 Broadway, New York. The 1856 editors were N. A. Calkins and A. R. Nippen. In 1860 the editors were listed as W. T. Adams (our "Oliver Optic"), N. A. Calkins, Father Forrester. Evidently Adams co-edited the publication from 1858 through December 1860. Beginning in 1861 Adams is shown as the sole editor. In 1863 the publishers are Galen James & Co., 15 Cornhill, Boston and N. A. Calkins, 135 Grand Street, New York. Printers evidently didn't stay put and bought and sold their businesses, since we first hear of Robinson, Greene & Co., then Galen James & Co., at 15 Cornhill. *Forrester's Boys and Girls Magazine* appears to have gone back to 1848. Did the name and publisher change take place in 1855 or were there two distinct magazines up to that time? *Student and Schoolmate* may have discontinued in 1866 when Optic began editing his own *Oliver Optic's Magazine—Our Boys and Girls* at the start of 1867 with Lee & Shepard as the publishers of the new magazine. (This information is admittedly a "reconstruction" from incomplete files on hand. We would welcome any additional facts that might clarify the records.)



The issues consisted of very slim monthly parts (16 or 17 sheets; 32 or 34 pages). The cover is rather especially nice in its old fashioned simplicity. Oliver Optic's serial stories were running to only six chapters—two a year, after he became the single editor. (Could they have been expanded into later books?) *Student and Schoolmate* did not carry as many, or as regularly, well-known writers as his own magazine was to do later. We did recognize Gail Hamilton (a pen name) who was to be one of the three editors of *Our Young Folks* when it began publication in 1865. The other two co-editors were John T. Trowbridge and Lucy Larcom. These two continued as editors of *Our Young Folks*, but Gail Hamilton was to drop out after the first year. Jacob Abbott appears in 1860. After Oliver was editor we find Gail Hamilton again; Lucy Larcom was noticed in a long featured poem entitled "Hand in Hand with Angels," and a Mrs. Browning appears with something called "Juile." If it's the Mrs. Browning we all know, we can only wonder if the poem was paid for, and if so, how much did she receive? Probably the most popular writer was Sophie May who was to continue through *Oliver Optic's Magazine* with Optic and become one of the most sought after authors of Lee & Shepard's publishing house.

Like so many of the earlier papers, few credits were given and many of those were only by initials; others appeared to have been "borrowed" from other publications. Later, when Optic began to look for material to fill the pages of his own magazine, he encouraged his young subscribers to send in stories and "head-work" (puzzles). The puzzles were credited by "assumed" names—"Sylvan Grove," "Humpty Dumpty," "Reindeer," etc. The stories apparently were over their own names, but they were not professional writers and one wonders if they received anything but the satisfaction of seeing their own work in print. His experience with *Student and Schoolmate*, one would imagine, might have set the pattern for the future *Oliver Optic Magazine*.

There was a regular editorial type feature called "Teacher's Desk." Some of the editorial comments during the Civil War make interesting reading today. Another regular department was the "Dialogue," sort of little speech-plays with declamation. And declamation with gestures! One was titled "First Lessons in Economy" by our own Oliver Optic. He also had a story featured in January, 1862: "The Widow and Her Son, A New Year's Story." The continued stories by Optic have titles like "Live and Learn; or, The Adventures of Paul Clifford," "Onward and Upward; or, Paul Clifford in Search of a Situation," "Trials and Triumphs; or, Paul Clifford in Trouble," and "Work and Play; or, Paul Clifford's Vacation," but they are hard to classify—they seem to be more of a long short story (what a contradiction in terms!) than they do a serial as he was to later write them.

In the issue of November, 1862 Oliver has given himself a big plug for the Riverdale Books (remember those "small books") and in the featured article tags on a new one, telling the complete story of "The Story of Seekpeace and the Giant." A mention of the "author of 'The Boat Club'" also gets in.

That about covers what we noted of *The Student and Schoolmate*, except to say that it seemed to be working up to a pattern that was to be elaborated upon later in Oliver's own magazine.

Part II, and the final installment, will consider *Oliver Optic's Magazine—Our Boys and Girls* in some detail, particularly the book length serials he originated therein, and those books which came after the last number of *Optic's Magazine* in 1875.

### Notes

1. If present plans go forward, many of Optic's books will be reviewed from today's viewpoint in future issues of *Dime Novel Round-Up*. At that



time we will be considering "descriptions," "plots," and "delineation of character" in some detail.

2. A good place to begin are the footnotes in Vol. II of **The House of Beadle and Adams** by Albert Johannsen, p. 7, University of Oklahoma Press, 1950. See also the end of quote from **Dictionary of American Biography**.

#### RECENTLY PUBLISHED ARTICLES CONCERNING DIME NOVELS (and not so recent)

Mystery Fiction in the Nineteenth Century, by Wilbur Jordan Smith **THE MYSTERY & DETECTION ANNUAL**, 1973, Beverly Hills, California, Donald Adams, Pub. 337p. \$20.00. A review of the detective stories published in paper covers during the late 1800's and early 1900's. The article barely touches the surface of a vast field that has laid dormant and unknown to the collectors of detective stories. It is hoped Mr. Smith will continue with his research and write a sequel. (Information sent in by J. Randolph Cox.)

**THAT WONDERFUL NICKEL AND DIME WORLD**, by Vincent Starrett. Chicago Tribune Magazine, March 19, 1967. An excellent article, well illustrated. Mr. Starrett views his association with dime novels as a youngster. (Sent in by Jack Bales.)

#### NICK CARTER 100th ANNIVERSARY BOOK

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J. Randolph Cox is a nationally recognized researcher and bibliographer of mystery and adventure fiction. He has given the Nick Carter adventures particular attention, and has spent thousands of hours chronicling and studying his many exploits. In that capacity he has been aptly dubbed the official Nick Carter historian.

Mr. Cox, a 37-year-old library administrator at St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minn., has written many articles, studies and bibliographies of Nick Carter for leading publications, mystery fiction clubs and literary organizations. He has closely traced the detective-spy's career from his beginnings in 1886 through his present Killmaster format. In the process, Mr. Cox has developed deep insight into America's literary styles and tastes over the last 100 years.

#### How did Mr. Cox become involved with Nick Carter?

As a boy in Southern Minnesota, Mr. Cox was one of the millions of fans who faithfully listened to the weekly radio shows, Nick Carter, Master Detective, and its spin-off, Chick Carter, Boy Detective. He joined the Inner Circle fan club and still owns much of the club's memorabilia such as secret rings, stamps, etc.

In high school, he became an avid mystery reader, and naturally was attracted to the Nick Carter novels that had been so popular for so many years. As a major in library science at St. Olaf, he began reading vintage Nick Carter dime novels and serials, and began his serious research into the fictional character. Since then, he has compiled extensive chronologies and bibliographies on most of Nick Carter's adventures. He is presently preparing a book on the evolution of Nick Carter from serial to dime novel to paperback, radio and film. He believes Nick Carter's adventures reflect the lives and times of their different periods, and is the reason why Nick Carter has survived and flourished while his fictional counterparts from the same eras have been long forgotten.



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